A Textbook of the Satsang Examinations Series: 1

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Kishore Satsang Prarambha

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Inspirer: HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

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Glossary

Blessings

The youth movement established and nourished by Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj has been expanding at a very rapid pace. With a view to satisfying the aspirations and the thirst for knowledge of the youth joining the organization, and also to enable them to understand and imbibe the principles of Akshar and Purushottam expounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the publications division, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, organized under the auspices of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, presents a series of books.

Through these books, it is intended to impart systematic, sustained and pure knowledge in simple language on a scholastic basis to children and youth of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. It is hoped that this Sanstha, established by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj for implementing and propagating the Vedic ideals propounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, will, through this activity, spread the ideals and noble traditions of the Sampradaya and through it, the culture and heritage of the Hindu religion.

It is the aim of this project to preach and spread the divine message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan to all corners of the world. We hope that all religious-minded truth-seekers of the Sampradaya and those outside of it, will welcome this activity and extend their fullest co-operation.

In order to encourage children and youths, annual examinations are held based on the curriculum as worked out in these books. Certificates are also awarded to successful candidates. We bless Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, Prof. Rameshbhai Dave, Kishorebhai Dave, and all others who have cooperated in the preparation of these books.

Shastri Narayanswarupdasji
(Pramukh Swami Maharaj)
Jai Swaminarayan

Vasant Panchmi
V.S. 2028 (1972 CE)
Atladra

Publisher's Note

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya has its unique tradition of worship rituals, festivals and observances. They are based on the Vedic Sanatan (Hindu) Dharma and have been revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan through his teachings and their practical application in his life. It is by following these conventions and commands that the lives of all *satsangis* can be properly moulded. By living according to these traditions devotees can protect themselves from bad company, become ideal satsangis and attain ultimate redemption in life.

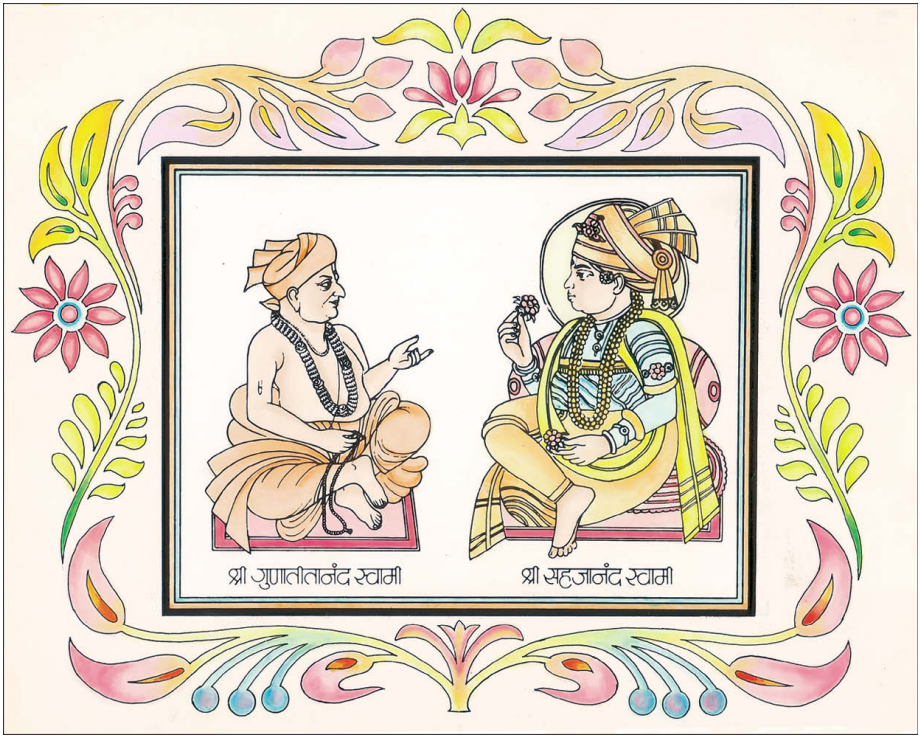
Basic religious vows (vrats) of satsang, prayers, *dhun*, puja, *arti*, *thal*, etc., along with life sketches of Shriji Maharaj, Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, other *paramhansas* and devotees are briefly described in this book in a lucid language. This book will provide a greater understanding of and attachment to Satsang.

This publication in English is a translation of the Gujarati book *Kishore Satsang Prarambha*.

This book has been designed to serve as part of the curriculum for the Satsang Examinations. More specifically, it is one of the textbooks for the first examination, Satsang Prarambha, in the series.

It is our earnest prayer that all satsangis study this book carefully, pass the examinations with flying colours, and above all, derive immense spiritual benefits and please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith



Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine māte;
Ame sau Shrijitanā yuvak, ladishu Shrijine māte...
Nathi dartā nathi kartā, amārā jānni parvā;
Amāre dar nathi koino, ame janmyā chhie marvā...ame 1
Ame ā yagna ārambhyo, balidāno ame daishu;
Amārā Akshar Purushottam, Gunātit jnānne gāishu...ame 2
Ame sau Shriji tanā putro, Akshare vās amāro chhe;
Svadharmi bhasma choli to, amāre kshobh shāno chhe...ame 3
Juo sau motinā Swāmi, na rākhi kai te khāmi;
Pragat Purushottam pāmi, malyā Gunātit Swāmi...ame 4

Translation

Pledge: Ame Sau Swamina Balak...

We are the children of Swami; we will die for him. We are the youths of Shriji Maharaj; we will fight for him. We are fearless; we will not shirk sacrificing our lives, for we are born to die. We have launched this movement and will undergo any suffering. We will sing the praises of Akshar-Purushottam.

We are the sons of Shriji Maharaj; we have our abode in Akshar. Consecrated as we are to *swadharma* (religious faith), we have no apprehension whatsoever. Lord Purushottam and Akshar, Gunatitanand Swami, are with us. We have accomplished our

goal.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan

1. Gifts from God

Is it possible for a man to live for five minutes without air? No! If he tries he will suffocate. Man cannot think of existing without air even for a minute. But do you know the price of air? It is nothing; it is a free gift from God.

Similarly, we cannot live without water. This is also a free gift from God. We get water from rivers, ponds, wells, etc. God sends rain to the earth, with the result that we get water and grains. Cotton is also produced, and we get cloth.

Thus, God gives us air, water, food and clothes. Not only are we indebted to God for light from the sun and the moon, but he also gives us fruits, flowers, vegetables, etc. It is because of all these blessings we are happy on this earth.

Let us think of our body. God has given us a balanced body with two eyes, two ears, a nose, two hands and two legs, all in their proper places. Sometimes when we see blind, deaf or dumb people we pity them, and we feel how lucky we are that God has given us a healthy body with all the sense organs in good condition. Thus, God is very kind to us in so many ways. We should therefore, remember him always. We should serve him.

How we can please God?

By going to the mandir.

By having the darshan of God.

By having the darshan of sadhus.

By serving the sadhus.

In this way God will be pleased. Some people think that there is no need to think of God from childhood; only in old age should one remember God. But that is not true. Dhruv worshipped God in his childhood. Even Prahlad worshipped God when he was a mere child. The famous devotee, Mirabai, also worshipped God in her young age. Good habits must be formed in childhood. Thus, if we do not think of God in young age, we will not be able to worship him with real devotion when we become old. Therefore, let us make it a point to think about God from ri8ght now.

2. Chanting God's Holy Name (Dhun)

Chanting the name of God

You must have heard of Sage Valmiki, who wrote the famous Ramayan. Early in life he was a dacoit. He killed people and robbed them of their possessions. He was a wicked person. But even such a sinner became a great sadhu by chanting the name of Shri Ram constantly.

Ajamil was also a shameless sinner. Ajamil had four sons. One day the famous saint Narad came to his house, and told him to chant the name of God. Ajamil at first refused to do so, because he did not believe in God. Then Naradji very shrewdly named his youngest son Narayan. And so it happened that whenever Ajamil called his son he had to say 'Narayan'. When this sinner was on his deathbed the servants of Yama – god of death – appeared before him to take his soul to hell. Ajamil cried out in terror and called out to his son "Narayan! Narayan!" As soon as the servants of Yama heard the name 'Narayan' they disappeared in panic. Such is the power that lies in the name of God!

During the time of Shriji Maharaj, there lived a heartless robber named Joban Pagi whose sole occupation was looting and harassing people. Sometimes he would kill them also. No one had the courage to challenge the dacoit Joban Pagi. Even the king's soldiers were afraid of him. However, his character was completely changed by the influence of Shriji Maharaj, who inspired him to live a pious life. He gave him a rosary and asked him to chant the name of God. Similarly, we can also change our irreligious thoughts and habits into good and pious ones by our devotion, by chanting the name of God or by prayer.

But how should we offer prayer to God? To whom should we pray?

Sitting in a cross-legged, erect posture and with eyes closed we must concentrate

our mind on God and our guru. We must forget worldly affairs. God is always worshipped along with his true devotee. Hence, remembering God and our guru, we should chant their names in the following manner:

Swami ane Narayan.
Akshar ane Purushottam.
Atma ane Paramatma.
Brahman ane Parabrahman.

We should chant in this manner every day.

Swami is Gunatitanand Swami,
Narayan is Sahajanand Swami.
Akshar is Gunatitanand Swami,
Purushottam is Sahajanand Swami.
Atma is Gunatitanand Swami,
Paramatma is Sahajanand Swami.
Brahman is Gunatitanand Swami,
Parabrahman is Sahajanand Swami.

Who should we worship? God and his ideal devotee.
That is Swami and Narayan.
Who is God? Sahajanand Swami.
Who is his ideal disciple? Gunatitanand Swami.
Who is our guru? Swami Narayanswarupdasji (Pramukh Swami Maharaj).
Who was his guru? Swami Jnanjivandasji (Yogiji Maharaj).
Who was his guru? Swami Yagnapurushdasji (Shastriji Maharaj).
Who was his guru? Pragji Bhakta (Bhagatji Maharaj).
Who was his guru? Anadi Mul Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami.

3. Prayer (Prarthana)

Bhagwan Swaminarayan is our father. We are his children. If we want nice food, new clothes, good books, we ask our father; and he brings us all these things. But if we want virtues, intellect, wisdom then who will give these to us? These are the gifts of God. If we pray to God with devotion, he will certainly grant us all these boons. With a pure heart and clear conscience we should pray to God, that is *prarthana*. To pray is to ask. Come, let us pray to God now. Sitting cross-legged and closing our eyes, let us concentrate our mind on God. Let us remember God and our guru. With folded hands and in all humility, let us bow down to God and pray:

Shri Hari jai jai jai jai kāri...
Akshardhāmnā Dhāmi tame chho,
Purushottam Parabrahman Hari chho,
Bhaktajanonā bhavbhayhāri... Shri Hari
Pragat Hari guru darshan āpo,

Prabhu tav nāmnā japiye jāpo,
Tav murti nitya hradaye dhāri... Shri Hari
Sadbuddhi sadgun Prabhu āpo,
Abhay kar muj shir par sthāpo,
Vighna sakalne sadya vidāri... Shri Hari
Shāstriji Mahārājnā gun nitya gāou,
Yogiji Mahārājnā gun nitya gāou,
Pramukh Swāminā gun nitya gāou,
Tav charanomā shish namāou,
āshish vachan dyo ānandkāri... Shri Hari

Meaning:

"Oh Sahajanand Swami! You are ever victorious. You are the Supreme Lord of Akshardham. You are the best, Purushottam, amongst all men. Beyond Brahman, you are Parabrahman. You remove the painful cycle of births and deaths of your devotees.

"Oh Sahajanand Swami! You are ever present on this earth, so grant me your darshan. Oh Lord, we always chant your name, and daily remember your *murti* in our heart.

"Oh Sahajanand Swami! We pray to you to bless us with wisdom and virtues. Bless us by placing your hands on our head, so that all our fears be warded off and our difficulties removed.

"We constantly sing the praises and the virtues of Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and our guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj and bow our heads down at your lotus feet. Please bless us so that we can be happy."

This is how we should regularly offer our prayer to God. He will bless us with wisdom and virtues.

4. Purna Purushottam Sahajanand Swami

Sahajanand Swami is our God and is also known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Let us, in brief, learn about his life.

Sahajanand Swami was born on Monday 3 April 1781 CE (Chaitra *sud* 9, Samvat 1837) in a village called Chhapaiya, near Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, North India. His childhood name was Ghanshyam and he was born in a Brahmin family. His father's name was Dharmadev and his mother's was Bhaktimata. He had two brothers, the eldest was called Rampratapbhai and the youngest was Ichharambhai. His parents were highly devoted to Shri Krishna. They were very religious minded and had deep faith in God.

Ghanshyam performed many miracles in his childhood. Everyone loved Ghanshyam, and because of his divine powers the village people began to think that this child must be an incarnation of God. Once, when Ghanshyam was 10 years old, he went to Kashi

with his father to attend a conference of learned pundits. He defeated them all in a debate on religion. Everyone was amazed at the knowledge and intellect of this young boy. All the same, to his parents he was a very obedient son. Ghanshyam would spend the whole day in worshipping God. In Ayodhya he passed much of his time in the mandirs. He was least interested in playing or in gossiping with boys of his age.

One day, after the death of his parents, he left home. Renouncing the world at the tender age of 11 he put on the garb of a celebate and began his travelling in the forest. Everyone now called him Nilkanth Varni. Wherever he went, he sanctified rivers, valleys, lakes and forests. He was not afraid of the wild animals of the forest or of the terrible forces of nature – heat, cold or rain. He charmed many sadhus and *rishis* by his divine personality and bestowed upon them *moksha.* Nilkanth Varni exposed the hypocrisy of many pseudo-sadhus. He granted salvation to 900,000 *rishis*, who were performing austerities in the Himalayas. He learnt *ashtang-yoga* from a great sadhu called Gopal Yogi. In return, Nilkanth Varni blessed Gopal Yogi and granted him *moksha*.

After going around the whole of India and visiting many mandirs, pilgrim places and religious institutions, he came to Saurashtra. In the small village of Loj there was the ashram of Ramanand Swami.In that ashram Nilkanth Varni met Muktanand Swami. He asked Muktanand Swami five questions regarding *jiva, ishwar, maya,* Brahman and Parabrahman and got the correct answers from him. Hence, Nilkanth Varni decided to stay there. At that time Ramanand Swami was in Kutch. After a few months he came to Piplana. Nilkanth met him. Ramanand Swami was pleased and said, “I am just a drum-beater, but the lead player is this Brahmachari Nilkanth.” Within a very short time he gave him *diksha* and renamed him as Sahajanand Swami. Devotees used to call him Maharaj or Shriji Maharaj.

Ramanand Swami selected Sahajanand Swami from amongst all his disciples to be his heir, and appointed him as his successor. Sahajanand Swami was so compassionate that he asked his guru, for two boons, or blessings: “If your devotee is destined to suffer the distress inflicted by the sting of one scorpion, may the distress of the sting of millions of scorpions befall every pore of my body, but no pain should afflict your devotee. And if the begging bowl is written in the fate of your devotee, may that begging bowl come to me; but on no account should your devotee suffer from lack of food or clothing.” Impressed by the spirit of compassion shown by Sahajanand Swami, Ramanand Swami readily blessed him and granted him these two boons.

After Ramanand Swami passed away, Shriji Maharaj soon introduced the chanting of the ‘Swaminarayan’ mantra. He also performed miracles by using his divine powers. He would bless human beings and even birds, animals and fish with samadhi. During samadhi people had the vision of their God. As a result, everyone began to worship Shriji Maharaj as the Supreme God. Hearing about his great glory, people desirous of acquiring *moksha* came to him from all parts of India. Many leading sadhus were given *paramhansa diksha.* In a single night he initiated 500 *paramhansas.* All these *paramhansas* spread the message and the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in various towns and villages.

Shriji Maharaj also undertook the task of social reform and performed social and relief work. During famine he started many almshouses from where free food was distributed to the needy. He made arrangements for the digging of wells and tanks to provide water. He stopped the practice of offering animals in sacrifices (*yagnas*) and performed many sacrifices in a non-violent manner *(ahimsak yagnas)*. Shriji Maharaj started schools to educate the poor and illiterate adults. He stopped many vile customs, especially prevalent among the people belonging to the more depressed strata of society. He arranged for women to be educated.

He was instrumental in the construction of many beautiful mandirs spread throughout Gujarat. He inspired many sadhus to learn the Sanskrit language and asked them to write religious books. These sadhus have written many devotional songs (kirtans) in Gujarati also. Shriji Maharaj inspired the sadhus to rise above temptations from women and wealth and shun worldly pleasures. For their spiritual benefit he formulated strict rules of moral conduct. They were not to think of material comforts, and were expected to observe celibacy. He gave the Shikshapatri to his followers, so that they could attain ultimate *moksha* from its observance.

Shriji Maharaj advised his followers to go to Junagadh for a month every year to listen to the discourses of Gunatitanand Swami. He also asked them to honour implicitly the commands of Gopalanand Swami. He established two main centres in Gujarat, one at Vartal and the other at Amdavad. He installed his own *murti* in the mandir at Vartal. Shriji Maharaj spent thirty years of his life in Gadhada in the *darbar* of Dada Khachar. After serving humanity and blessing innumerable disciples, Sahajanand Swami returned to his divine abode, Akshardham, on 1 June 1830 CE (Jeth *sud* 10, Samvat 1886). On his memorial shrine in Lakshmi Vadi, Gadhada, a beautiful mandir has been erected in his divine memory.

5. Daily Puja

Worshipping God daily

We eat every day. We take our bath every day. And we sleep every day. Just as we go through this daily routine every day without fail, and spend time on it, we should also spend some time in worshipping God every day. We must make it a point to perform puja every morning after having a bath. We should not eat anything nor even drink water before performing puja. Doing puja early in the morning makes us feel holy and our mind pure and peaceful. The whole day passes in good thoughts. Thinking of God early in the morning makes us feel happy. The great King Ambrish, in spite of his busy schedule, used to spend hours in performing his puja.

Let us see how we should perform our daily puja.

- A person should have his own puja set. Worship before a *ghar mandir* or another *murti* of God is not considered as daily personal puja.
- Breakfast or even water cannot be taken before puja is completed.

- Concentrate whilst performing daily puja. Do not talk with others.
- Perform your puja daily and take it with you whenever you are away from home.

1. Preparations

- Awake early every morning. After brushing your teeth and visiting the bathroom, take a bath or a shower.
- Do not put on your normal work or school clothes, wrap a towel or wear shorts, but wear either a dhoti and upper cloth, *lengho* and *jabbho* or washed clothes.
- Choose a quiet place to perform puja.
- Spread your *asan* and sit either facing north or east.
- Lay another *asan* and place the *murtis*, Shikshapatri, *mala*, *gaumukhi* and *tilak-chandlo* set.
- Never interchange your *asan* with the one you use for the *murtis*.

2. Tilak-Chandlo

- On the little mortar squeeze 4-5 drops of water. Make a sandalwood paste that is not too watery or too thick. Spread it evenly on the *tilakyu*.
- Place the 'U' of the *tilakyu* between the eyebrows and carefully slide it up the forehead.
- In the middle of the *tilak* imprint a red *chandlo* of *kumkum*.
- On both outer biceps and the chest imprint the *tilak* and a *chandlo* of sandalwood paste.

3. Dhyan – Meditation

- Close your eyes and sit in an upright posture. One can sit in either Padmasan or Siddhasan. Then perform *pranayam* for a couple minutes.
- Contemplate on the *atma* telling yourself mentally: "I am *atma*, I am not this body. I am *chaitanyarup*, I am *brahman* and Paramatma Bhagwan Purushottam resides eternally within me."
- Then perform *mansi* puja, imagining God and guru to be before you. Gently awaken them. Lead them through the daily morning routine. Offer them clothes, ornaments, garlands, *arti*, *thal*, etc.

4. Ahvan – Invocation

- Lay out the *murtis* as shown in Murti Layout 1 or 2 (see page 12).

Before you position each *murti* touch it to both eyes and heart in respect.

- Now ask God and guru to grace their presence in the puja by reciting the following *shlok*:

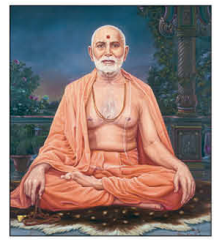
  Uttishthotishtha he Nātha Swāminārāyan Prabho;
  Dharmasuno Dayāsindho sveshām shreyah param kuru.āgachha Bhagwan Deva svasthānāt Parameshwara;
  Aham pujām karishyāmi sadā tvam sanmukho bhava.

  "O Father! O Bhagwan Swaminarayan! Please awake! Please arise! O Son of Dharma! O Ocean of Compassion! Profoundly bless your devotees.
  O Parmeshwar! Please come from your rightful place; I will perform your puja. Please forever remain before me."

Murti Layout 1

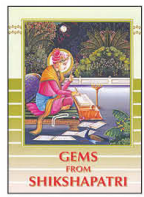
Shri Bhagatji Maharaj

Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj

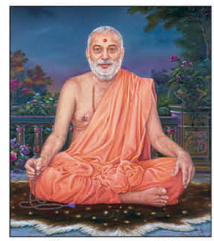


Shri Shastriji Maharaj

Shri Yogiji Maharaj



Shikshapatri



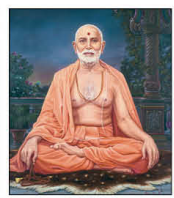
Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Murti Layout 2

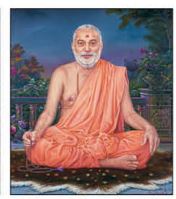
Shri Yogiji Maharaj

Shri Bhagatji Maharaj

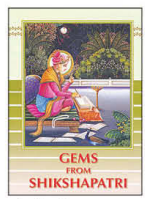
Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj



Shri Shastriji Maharaj



Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj



Shikshapatri

5. Mantra Jap – Mala

- Whilst doing darshan of the *murtis* (when seated) tell at least 5 *malas*.
- Hold the *mala* in your right hand, resting it on the second finger with the first finger held out straight not touching the beads. With the thumb turn each bead in a clockwise direction and chant 'Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan'.
- Start each rosary from the largest bead (*mer*). On reaching the largest bead and tuft, turn the *mala* around and start chanting again.
- It is preferred to tell the *mala* by keeping it in a *gaumukhi* – a right angled *mala* bag.

6. Tapni Mala

- Then stand on one leg with the other crossed over it at the knee. Hold up both hands.
- Keep your eyes open, do darshan of the *murtis* and tell one *mala*.
- Think of Nilkanth Varni. Resolve to offer devotion to God no matter what the hardship.

7. Pradakshina – Circumambulation

- Still telling the *mala,* walk clockwise slowly around the puja 11 times with the feeling that God and the Satpurush are the centre of your life.
- As you finish each *pradakshina* bow in respect to the *murtis*. Do not let go of the *mala* whilst doing this.

8. Dandvat Pranam – Prostration

- *Dandvats* show our total surrender to God. We become humble.
- Perform 5 *shastang dandvats*, fully stretched out on the ground.
- Shastang *dandvat* means offering prostration to God by touching the following eight to the ground: head, chest, nose, arms, legs, sight, speech and mind.
- Perform a sixth *dandvat* asking forgiveness for any mistakes that may have been made, such as, hurting another's feelings through mind, speech or actions.

Recite the shlok:
Aparādha-sahasrāni kriyante'harnisham mayā;
Dāso'yam-iti mām matvā kshamasva Parameshwara.
"Day and night, hundreds of mistakes are committed by me; Considering me to be your servant, O God! Please forgive me!"

9. Prarthana – Prayer

- Now sit down and before praying offer a *thal* in *mansi*.

Then pray:

He Mahārāj! He Swāmi! Aham-mamattva rupi māyā thaki, indriyo-antahkaran rupi shatru thaki tathā darek prakārnā kusang thaki māri rakshā karjo. āpmā ane āpnā bhaktomā akhand divyabhāv rahe, nirdoshbuddhi rahe, ātmabuddhi thāy ane āpni āgnā pramāne vartāy tevu bal āpjo.

"O Maharaj! O Swami! Please protect me from maya in the form of attachment to 'I' and 'Mine'; enemies in the form of the indriyas and antahkaran; and all forms of kusang. May I forever maintain a feeling of divinity, faultlessness and intense attachment to you and your devotees. And please grant me the strength to observe all your commands."

- You can pray for any other matter concerning you.
- Many also pray for the continuing good health of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

10. Visarjan and Shikshapatri

- Now thank God and gurus for being present in your puja and for accepting your puja. Ask forgiveness for any mistakes you may have made during puja.
- Recite the *visarjan shlok*, where you ask God to return to his abode and in your heart and to come again the next morning:
  Svasthānam gachha Devesha pujām-ādāya māmakim;
  Ishtakāma-prasiddhyartham punarāgamanāya cha.
  "O Lord of Lords! Having accepted my puja, return to your rightful place; and please return again (tomorrow) to fulfil my wishes."
- Pick up the *murtis* one by one.
- Then read five verses from the Shikshapatri.

11. After Puja

- Pack away the puja neatly, placing it in a safe and clean location.
- Then do darshan of Thakorji in your *ghar mandir*.
- Bow down to your parents (*panchang pranam*) and greet them and all others present by saying, 'Jai Swaminarayan'.

6. Brave Child Devotee

The angry father overturned the cart

The sadhus of Shriji Maharaj travelled from place to place encouraging people to follow the moral path prescribed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Once, in the district of Jamnagar, a farmer's young son, impressed by their sincerity accepted the vows of Satsang (*panch vartman*). He prayed to God every day, offered puja, applied *tilak chandlo* to his forehead, and daily visited the mandir.

His father, however, was unconvinced. He did not like his son's new beliefs and code of conduct. But the son was a true *satsangi*. He told his son not to worship Swaminarayan. Daily his father scolded him because of his puja rituals. He tried persuasion, then threats, then finally gave him a sound thrashing; but the boy would not yield. He eagerly pursued his devotion to God.

One day his father became so angry that he threatened him with death.

"If you chant the name of Swaminarayan any more," he shouted, "I will kill you."

But he was a brave boy. He calmly replied, "Come what may, I will never give up the practice of worshipping Swaminarayan, who is God to me."

The irate father then tied his son to the yoke of his cart, and told him, "If you remove your *kanthi* I will let you go, otherwise I will kill you here and now, by raising the yoke of this cart."

The son replied, "I will never take off my *kanthi*, nor leave my devotion to Swaminarayan even if I have to die."

The angry father at once raised the cart. Chanting "Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan" the son died and went to Akshardham – the abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

In Gadhada Shriji Maharaj heard this tragic story. He said, "This boy is indeed a true devotee. Prahlad could continue to have faith in God, as God saved him from the

many cruel ordeals through which he had to pass. This farmer's humble son, however, was not so protected, and yet he did not flinch from his faith. His father is like Hiranyakashyapu."

There is a moral in this anecdote which we must imbibe. We should never give up our faith or devotion towards God, whether he protects us or not. That is the hallmark of a true devotee.

7. Gangama

Gangama prepared Maharaj's meals

A Brahmin woman named Gangama lived in the small town of Jetalpur near Amdavad, in Gujarat. She was the disciple of Atmanand Swami, who was the guru of Ramanand Swami – Ramanand Swami was the guru of Sahajanand Swami. Whenever Shriji Maharaj came to Gangama's home in Jetalpur, she used to welcome him with such affectionate words, "Oh, my nephew, son! Welcome, welcome to my house." Shriji Maharaj would reply in the same affectionate tone, "Yes my dear mother, I have come."

Thus, Gangama loved Shriji Maharaj with motherly affection but she did not know he was God incarnate. Once, Ramanand Swami appeared before Gangama in a dream, and told her, "Sahajanand Swami is the Supreme God. He is the Lord of Akshardham and I had come due to his command. I was just a drum-beater, but the actual player, the real guru is this Sahajanand Swami. You should not address him as son or nephew. You should ask his forgiveness for failing to recognize him as God. Spread the mattress and pillow that belonged to me and have him sit on it. Then I shall be pleased upon you. He will come to your place in a short time. Welcome him with all the adoration with which you would welcome God."

A few days later Gangama heard that Shriji Maharaj was visiting her town. She gathered all the devotees and with great pomp and splendour went to receive Shriji Maharaj. She asked her daughter to carry the auspicious coconut-bearing *kalash* on her head. Taking *kumkum* and singing holy songs, all of them went to receive Shriji Maharaj.

Riding on the mare, Manki, Maharaj came to Jetalpur. He was wearing rich garments and ornaments. It was a glorious scene. All the disciples prostrated and offered *pujan* in homage. The women expressed their devotion by bowing with folded hands from a distance. With the beating of drums and in full splendour Shriji Maharaj entered Jetalpur.

First he went to the house of Gangama. She requested, "Maharaj, please sit on this cushion laid on the cot."

Maharaj asked her, "Call me as, 'My son, my nephew,' as before then I will sit on the seat."

Gangama replied, "I won't call you like that from now."

"Then I too, will not sit on the seat," said Maharaj firmly.

Gangama said, "O Maharaj! Till now I used to call you like that out of ignorance. But Ramanand Swami appeared in my dream and told me that you are God. Please forgive me for all my mistakes and take a seat on the cot."

The almighty God knew everything through his all-knowing powers. He said smilingly, "Yes, I pardon you. But I like very much your addressing me as your son." Shriji Maharaj then sat on the cushioned seat. Gangama was now fully convinced and had complete faith in the supreme glory of Maharaj.

In Jetalpur, Gangama would prepare delicious food for Shriji Maharaj, and always served him with love and devotion. Shriji Maharaj also enjoyed her meals very much, especially the rice and *dal* prepared by Gangama. Wherever Maharaj went to celebrate festivals, Gangama also went, and cooked meals for him.

At times Gangama used to keep a cooking grate and all the provisions needed to prepare meals for Maharaj in a basket. She would carry the basket on her head with the rice and *dal* simmering inside and walk behind Maharaj. When Shriji Maharaj took a break during a journey, she would serve him a full meal of rice, *dal,* chapattis, vegetables, etc. With every care and devotion she would thus keep a meal ready for Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj was greatly pleased by the love, devotion and loyalty with which she served him.

8. Akhandanand Swami

Akandanand Swami thought that his death was near

In accordance with the instructions of Shriji Maharaj, his sadhus moved about various centres to spread his holy message. They had to undergo many hardships while carrying out their mission. Once, Akhandanand Swami was travelling alone. As his name suggests, he was always happy. In spite of the many ordeals he suffered, his face always beamed with a glow of happiness. He derived great happiness in remembering Maharaj's *murti* and in chanting his holy name. He was a true sadhu.

Once, when he was travelling he lost his way and found himself in a dark forest. There was no sign of any human habitation. The forest was dark, dense and wild. As he proceeded he saw a ferocious tiger.

Swamiji thought, "Certainly, I will die today. The tiger will certainly devour me. But one day or another I will have to go to God's abode. So why not today? And my body will provide food for the tiger."

With these thoughts in mind he went ahead without any fear. But God protects his devotees. How can he let them down or even bear to see them suffer?

Akhandanand Swami thought, "I am *atma*. I am immortal. Why should I fear death? My name is Akhandanand. Who can snatch away my happiness?" Emboldened by these thoughts, Swami stood in front of the tiger. The tiger lifted his paw to strike him. Akhandanand Swami remained steadfast in remembering Shriji Maharaj. Suddenly, as if answering a call from above, the ferocious animal dropped its paw. Then the tiger fell at the feet of Akhandanand as though he was acknowledging his master! After a little while the tiger rose and slowly disappeared into the forest.

9. Arti

Performing arti every morning and evening

Ramanand Swami was the guru of Shriji Maharaj. He was also the guru of Muktanand Swami. Before Ramanand Swami decided to return to the divine abode, he declared Shriji Maharaj as his spiritual successor, and instructed all his followers that they should remain faithful to the commands of Shriji Maharaj. Muktanand Swami was very much attached to Ramanand Swami. After Ramanand Swami passed away, Muktanand Swami became very sad. Shriji Maharaj decided to remove the grief from the heart of Muktanand Swami.

Once, Shriji Maharaj was in the village of Kalvani. Early one morning, he and the other sadhus were going for a bath in the nearby river. Muktanand Swami was following them close behind. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and Muktanand

Swami had a vision of his guru Ramanand Swami. With tears in his eyes Muktanand Swami bowed to his guru.

Ramanand Swami asked him, "Why are you so sad and unhappy? I had told you that I was merely a drum-beater, and the master player would arrive. Shriji Maharaj is the real star. Accept him as your guru and please him, then I shall be pleased upon you." Muktanand Swami touched Ramanand Swami's feet and resolved to obey his command. Then his grief disappeared and his heart throbbed with inexpressible joy.

After taking bath in the river, he came to the mandir, made a garland of flowers and put it around the neck of Shriji Maharaj and pledged his loyalty and devotion, saying, "You are a Sadguru." As an expression of his faith, he performed the *arti* with lighted wicks. The song he composed instantly in his praise at this time is known as *arti.* Since then we all sing the same *arti.* This holy *arti* irradiates our heart with a divine light. We must memorize this *arti.*

Jai Sadguru Swāmi,
(Prabhu) Jai Sadguru Swāmi;
Sahajānand dayālu (2), balavant Bahunāmi...Jai
Charan-saroj tamāra vandu kar jodi,
(Prabhu) vandu kar jodi;
Charane chitt dharyāthi (2), dukh nākhyā todi...Jai
Nārāyan sukh dātā, dvij-kul tanu dhāri,
(Prabhu) dvij-kul tanu dhāri;
Pāmar patit uddhāryā (2), aganit narnāri...Jai
Nitya nitya nautam lilā kartā Avināshi,
(Prabhu) kartā Avināshi;
Adsath tirath charane (2), koti Gayā Kāshi...Jai
Purushottam pragat nu je darshan karshe,
(Prabhu) je darshan karshe;
Kāl karma thi chhuti (2), kutumb sahit tarshe...Jai
ā avsar karunā nidhi, karunā bahu kidhi,
(Vāle) karunā bahu kidhi;
Muktānand kahe mukti (2), sugam kari sidhi...Jai

In the *arti*, Muktanand Swami extols the glory of Sahajanand Swami, saying that he is very kind and all powerful. He destroys all the sufferings of those who seek refuge at his lotus feet. Born in a Brahmin family, he has uplifted innumerable wicked and helpless people from the clutches of *maya*. He is indestructible, has been perpetually performing divine exploits and all the holy places reside at his sacred feet. Whosoever shall have darshan of this *pragat* Purushottam shall be set free from the bondages of *kal* and karma and attain the heavenly bliss, together with his family. This Sadguru Swami (Sahajanand Swami) is an ocean of compassion and has made the ultimate *mukti* easily accessible to all.

After *arti* prostrate before the *murtis* of God and recite the following *shloks* in praise of God.

Krupā karo muj upare, sukhnidhi Sahajānand,

Gun tamārā gāvavā, buddhi āpjo Sukhkand.

O ocean of bliss, Sahajanand, bless me with the wisdom to sing your praises.

Akshar Purushottam ahi pruthvi upar padhāriyā,
Anek jiva uddhārvā, manushyatan dhāri rahyā.

Akshar and Purushottam have both manifested in human form on this earth to liberate countless *jivas.*

Āvyā Akshardhāmthi avanimā, aishvarya mukto lai,
Shobhe Aksharsāth sundar chhabi, lāvanya tejomayi.

Together with Akshar, *akshar muktas* and his divine powers, Purushottam has incarnated on earth. With Akshar, his form is resplendent, pleasant and full of divine light.

Kartā divya sadā rahe pragat je, sākar sarvopari,
Sahajānand krupālune nit namu, sarvāvtari Hari.

I bow daily to Sahajanand, who is the all-doer, ever manifest on earth, with a divine form, merciful and supreme.

Je chhe Akshardhām divya Harinu, mukto Hari jyā vase,
Māyāpār kare anant jivane, je mokshanu dvār chhe;
Brahmāndo anutulya rom distā, seve Parabrahmne,
A Mul Akshar murtine namu sadā Gunātitānandne.

I bow always to the *murti* of Mul Aksharbrahman – Gunatitanand. He is the divine abode of Hari, where the Lord and infinite liberated souls reside.

He takes infinite *jivas* beyond *maya* and is the gateway to ultimate liberation. Before his greatness, even the countless universes are like mere atoms circling his every pore. He eternally serves Parabrahman.

Shrimannirgun-murti sundar tanu, je gnānvartā kathe,
Je sarvagna, samast sadhugun chhe, māyā thaki mukta chhe;
Sarvaishvaryathi purna, āshritjanonā dosh tāle sadā,
Evā Prāgji Bhaktrāj gurune, preme namu sarvadā.

I always bow lovingly to guru Pragji Bhakta. His *murti* is beautiful, powerful and free from all material qualities. He continually delivers spiritual discourses. He is omniscient, full of all saintly virtues and above the influence of *maya.* He is full of all the divine powers and always removes the deficiencies in all his disciples.

Jenu nām ratyā thaki malin sankalpo samulā gayā,
Jene sharan thayā pachhi bhavtanā ferā virāmi gayā;
Jenu gān dasho dishe harijano gāye ati harshthi,
Evā Yagnapurushdās tamne pāye namu pritthi.

I lovingly bow at your holy feet, O Yagnapurushdas, by chanting whose name all

evil thoughts are extinguished. By seeking refuge at whose holy feet one is liberated from the cycle of births and deaths and whose glory is sung by devotees in all directions.

Vāni amrutthi bhari madhusami sanjivni lokmā,
Drashtimā bhari divyatā nirakhtā sudivya bhakto badhā;
Haiye het bharyu mithu jananishu ne hāsya mukhe vasyu,
Te Shri Gnānji Yogirāj Gurune, nitye namu bhāvshu.

I offer my obeisance with great affection to Yogiji Maharaj, Swami Jnanjivandas! Your sweet speech is like the nectar that restores life. All the devotees perceive divinity in your eyes. You have motherly love in your heart and an ever-smiling face.

Shobho sādhugune sadā saralne jagte anāsakta chho,
Shāstriji guru Yogiji ubhayni krupātanu patra chho;
Dhāri dharma dhurā samudra sarkhā gambhir gnānej chho,
Nārāyanswarupdās gunine snehej vandu aho.

I bow down heartily to you, O Narayanswarupdas! Ever simple, detached and adorned with all saintly virtues, you are doubly blessed by Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. You are the defender of the faith and possess deep knowledge like the vast ocean.

Brahmrupe Shri Harinā charanmā anurāgie
Evi ja āshish dās bhāve hasta jodi māgie.

May we become *brahmarup* and remain at the feet of Shri Hari while observing his wishes; with folded hands and total humility we request such blessings.

In this way, all should perform *arti* (while singing this prayer one should move one's right hand with a lighted lamp in a clockwise circular movement in front of the *murti* of Shriji Maharaj and our *guru parampara* and ring a small bell with one's left hand) and sing these *shloks* daily in the morning and evening at the mandir. Also, all family members should get together every morning and evening and perform *arti* in the *ghar mandir*.

10. Brave Bhaguji

Shriji Maharaj nursed Bhaguji's wounds

Bhaguji was the personal attendant of Shriji Maharaj. He was a very devoted and brave man. He had forsaken everything, including his home, village and wealth, and chosen to remain in the service of Shriji Maharaj. Even though he was short, he was very brave. In those days people were harassed by dacoits and thieves. Maharaj used to engage brave watchmen like Bhaguji for protecting the fields of Dada Khachar. Even the hardened robbers were afraid of Bhaguji. They dared not to enter the fields when guarded by this brave man. No robber was prepared to face Bhaguji in a fight.

Once, the Darbar of Bhadli State, Bhan Khachar, proclaimed that he would give a piece of land and a handsome reward to any person who would kill Bhaguji and bring his severed head to him. But no one was bold enough to fight with this brave lion, Bhaguji. Ultimately, two brothers from Sindh, Khabad and Mataro, took up the challenge. They came to attack Bhaguji when he was guarding the field.

Bhaguji confronted Khabad and said, "You strike first." Khabad attacked Bhaguji so fiercely that he was severely wounded. After tying up his own wound, Bhaguji retaliated and killed Khabad with a single blow. Then Mataro took up the fight. The struggle went on for some time. There were eighteen wounds on Bhaguji's body. But despite the wounds, Bhaguji attacked Mataro so fiercely that he ran for his life.

Bhaguji was seriously wounded, and there was little hope for his survival. Maharaj himself looked after him. He dressed the wounds. He also stopped the practice of *arti,* beating drums, bells, etc., in the village because it would awaken the valour of Bhaguji and he would get up and the stitches on the wound may open up. Shriji Maharaj used to come daily to visit him.

Once, the barber (who was dressing Bhaguji's wounds) was bribed by Bhaguji's

enemies to kill him. The barber, out of greed, dressed up the wounds with pigeon faeces that burned. At the same time somebody started ringing the bell loudly in order to upset Bhaguji and worsen his condition. Bhaguji suffered severe pain. On hearing about this, Shriji Maharaj immediately came to see Bhaguji. He understood at once that somebody had plotted to kill Bhaguji. Maharaj scolded the barber, who confessed that he was offered a piece of land to murder Bhaguji.

Maharaj asked Sachchidanand Swami to take care of Bhaguji and if necessary defy the god of death, Yama, as he wanted to give him a new life. Maharaj's protection worked. For, within a short time Bhaguji recovered.

When the King of Bhavnagar, Bapu Vajesinh, heard about the bravery of Bhaguji he thought of recruiting him for his army. He called Bhaguji on the pretext of honouring him and offered, "I will pay you a salary of three hundred rupees a month and give you charge of five hundred mounted soldiers in the army." Bhaguji declined the handsome offer.

Bhaguji replied, "I want nothing. I only want Bhagwan Swaminarayan. I have given up everything and all my wealth only for him. I want to spend the rest of my life in the service of Bhagwan Swaminarayan." Vajesinh Darbar was greatly impressed with the reply and admired him even more.

11. Samat Patel

Samat Patel sold everything and effered the money to Maharaj

A true devotee of God sacrifices everything in return for his grace and blessings. He does not hesitate to give up his wealth, family interests, even his own life for God. This is the story of one such devotee.

Samat Patel, a faithful disciple of Shriji Maharaj, lived in a small village in the Valak region. Once, he came to Gadhada for the darshan of Shriji Maharaj. At the time Shriji Maharaj was busy supervising the construction of the mandir. He was in need of money to pay the salaries of the labourers engaged in the task. He asked Samat Patel, "I need money, will you give me some?"

Without hesitation Samat Patel replied, "Yes, Maharaj."

Immediately, Samat Patel went home and sold everything he had – his land, bullock cart and buffaloes. He collected Rs. 4,500, came to Shriji Maharaj and offered him the whole amount.

Shriji Maharaj enquired, "Where did you bring such a large amount from?"

Samat Patel replied, "I had the money with me."

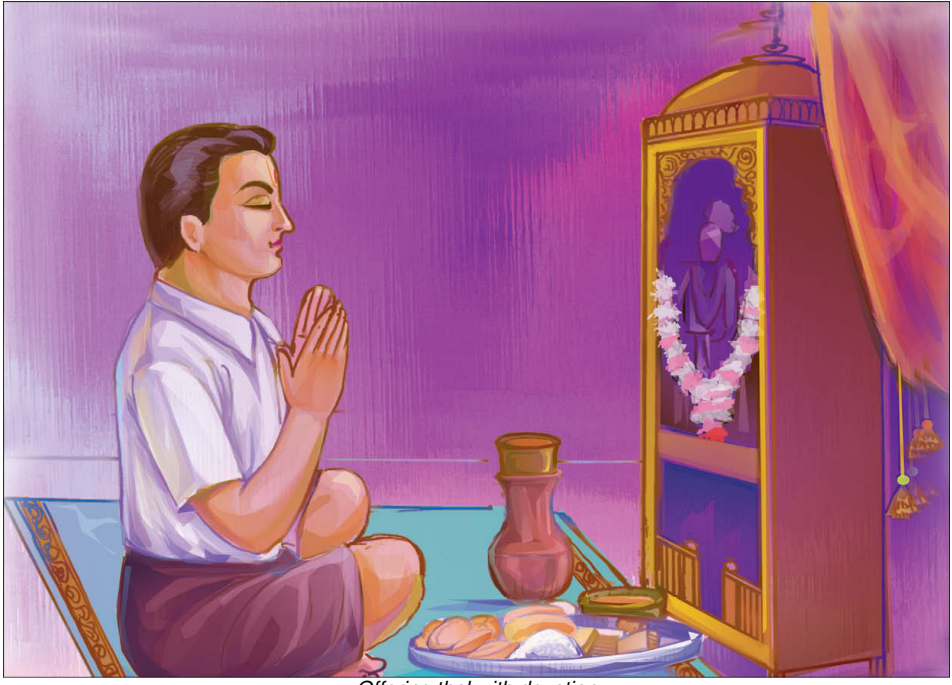
But the all-knowing Maharaj knew how he had got the money. He asked Samat Patel, "Tell the truth. Where did the money come from?" Samat Patel then told Maharaj how he had sold everything he had.

Maharaj said, "You have sold everything – land, farm, carts, cattle, food! What will you eat now and how will you feed your family? I shall keep only one thousand rupees. I want you to take back the rest of the money."

Samat Patel replied, "We will not go hungry. We will borrow food grains from other villagers and by next year we shall return what we had borrowed."

Shriji Maharaj was happy to hear these words. Samat Patel was a true disciple and an ideal for all devotees.

12. Offering of Food to God (Thal)



Offering thal with devotion

We live on a daily intake of food. Without food we would die of hunger. God gives enough sunlight and water to grow food grains. The farmer's labour alone is not enough. We must therefore offer a bit of everything that we eat to God before we start eating.

God is the creator and the Lord of all that we see around us. Therefore, before we utilize these things for our benefit, we must first offer them to him. Food grows because of his grace, so how can we eat it without offering it to him first? All the delicious food items for which we have a special liking should first be placed before him. This offering is called *thal*. Bhumanand Swami had composed a *thal,* and there is an interesting story as to how the *thal* was composed.

Once, it so happened that Sadguru Bhumanand Swami did not get anything to eat for four days. On the fifth day he came to a village. A sadhu there took pity on Bhumanand Swami and gave him some green wheat grains *(ponk)* to eat. Bhumanand Swami was overjoyed. In gratitude he first offered the green wheat to God. And being a poet, words flowed spontaneously from his lips '*Jamo thal Jivan jau vari...*'

Shriji Maharaj gave him darshan and ate the food items spoken of in the *thal.* Maharaj spoke words of cheer and consolation to Bhumanand Swami and then disappeared. Since then, this *thal* has become popular in Satsang. Let us also sing the same *thal* and keep Maharaj in our minds. If we show sincere devotion to Shriji Maharaj, as Bhumanand Swami did, he will surely come and accept our *thal.*

Jamo thāl Jivan jāu vāri; dhou kar-charan karo tyāri
Beso melyā bājothiyā dhāli, katorā kanchanni thāli,
jale bharyā chambu chokhāli...1

Kari kathā ghauni poli, meli ghrut sākarmā boli,
kādhyo ras kerino gholi...2
Galyā sātā ghebar fulvadi, dudhpāk mālpuā kadhi,
puri pochi thai chhe ghi mā chadhi...3
Athānā shāk sundar bhaji, lāvi chhu tarat kari tāji,
dahi bhāt sākar chhe jhājhi...4

(A few minutes of meditation)

In meditation imagine that Shriji Maharaj and the guru are having their meal. Then help them wash their hands and mouth and then sing,

Chalu karo lāvu hu jaljhāri, elāychi laving sopāri,
pānbidi banāvi sāri...5
Mukhvās mangamtā laine, prasādino thāl mune daine,
Bhumānand kahe rāji thaine...6

Meaning:

O Jivan (Maharaj)! Please bless me and accept this offering; I will wash your hands and feet in preparation;

Please sit on the stool which has been laid out, with gold plate and bowls before you and a tumbler full of water…1

I have made wheat flour *puranpuris,* soaked in ghee and sugar; and have extracted (fresh) juice from mangoes…2

(I also offer) sweet *sata, ghebar, fulvadi, dudhpak, malpua, kadhi;* and soft *puris* fried in ghee…3

I have brought *athana* (pickles), freshly cooked (spiced) spinach; and rice, yogurt mixed with ample sugar…4

Please wash your hands with the water I've brought; and accept the cardamom, cloves, betel nuts and (refreshing) betel leaf *pans* that I have made …5

Please take the *mukhvas* you like, and be pleased, says Bhumanand; and give me the (remainder) of the *thal* (as *prasad*)…6

In this way we should always first offer our food to God and only then eat, and thus, express our thanks to him for what he has given.

13. Jodho the Shepherd

Maharaj churned buttermilk with Jodho

Maharaj had appointed Jodho the shepherd to look after the cattle of Dada Khachar. This shepherd had an affectionate nature, though his language was rather rough. He loved Maharaj very much. He would not eat any rich or tasteful dish, but ate only plain buttermilk and *rotlo*. Once, when Maharaj passed through the village of Nani Barai, Jodho was so fascinated as a result of Maharaj's darshan that he immediately left his home, wife, children and his cattle and followed Maharaj to Gadhada. There, he took up service under Shriji Maharaj.

Once, at Dada Khachar's *darbar*, the women were boiling milk to prepare *dudhpak*. Unfamiliar with such a preparation as *dudhpak,* Jodho did not approve of it and thought that valuable milk was being burnt away. He complained to Maharaj, "Laduba and Jivuba are burning our milk. Milk should not be burnt away."

Maharaj laughed and said, "Take the cattle to the field, and come back for lunch at noon." Jodho was angry but went away as directed.

When he came in the afternoon, the sadhus were seated in meditation with their heads covered by their upper garments. When he saw them he said, "You have burnt the milk and now you have no alternative but to cry!"

Shriji Maharaj quietened him. When Maharaj began to serve *dudhpak,* Jodho protested, "Please don't give me that burnt milk."

"Just try it first," Maharaj said and served him a little. He tasted it and then realized

that the milk was not spoiled, but a fine delicious sweet had been prepared out of it.

Many a times Jodho offered fresh milk with almonds, saffron and sugar to Maharaj. To please Maharaj, he showed him his ability to control fighting cattle. At times he would offer fresh curd, buttermilk or butter, and Maharaj, on account of his loving devotion, would accept. Sometimes he would milk the cows in such a way that milk fell in a spray from the udder on the feet of Maharaj. Every time Maharaj happened to pass that way, he saw some new evidence of Jodho's affectionate and innocent behaviour.

Sometimes Maharaj would help him in churning the buttermilk. During this process, Maharaj would uncover the buttermilk pot, and eat the butter for fun. But Jodho's vigilant eyes would immediately catch Maharaj.

Once, Maharaj tried to tease Jodho saying, "You have remained a fool of fools." Jodho replied, "Yes, I know that you are so wise that you once deluged the whole universe only to save one sparrow! Even though I am foolish and you are very wise, can you tell me out of these she goats, which is Koyli, Katudi and Jambudi?"

At this impertinence, Muktanand Swami reproached Jodho, "Maharaj is the all-knower." Maharaj only laughed, and then put Jodho into samadhi and showed him his divine form in Akshardham. When he came out of the samadhi, he was very happy, and realized the power and glory of Maharaj.

Jodho's devotion can be compared only to that of the *gopis* of Vraj. He possessed such strength that he could drive away a tiger, but he was very meek and humble before Maharaj. How great was the devotion of a simple, unlettered man!

14. The Muslim Woman from Bhal Region

Bibi gave a babul stick to Maharaj

God is merciful. His mercy knows no bounds. Even a little time spent in devoted service to him frees a person from the clutches of *maya.* Whether he is a Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Parsi, whether he is a man or a woman, whether young or old, he is merciful to one and all. He showers his blessings on all alike.

In the district of Bhal there is a small town called Sodhi. In this town lived a Muslim woman (*bibi*). She had reared a babul tree in her garden. The tender sticks of this tree, used for brushing teeth, grew in abundance; but the woman did not give them to anyone. She simply said, "These sticks are meant for God alone."

Once, Shriji Maharaj came to that village. On the outskirts of the village he stayed to have a bath in the pond. He asked Sura Khachar, "Bring me a babul stick."

Sura Khachar replied, "Maharaj! This Bhal region is dry. How is it possible to find such a stick here?"

Even so Maharaj insisted, "At least go and try." Accordingly Sura Khachar went.

As he passed by the Muslim woman's compound he saw the babul tree. He promptly requested her to give him a stick. The Bibi enquired, "Who is the person in this dry Bhal region who expects to find a babul stick here?"

Sura Khachar said, "He is our God."

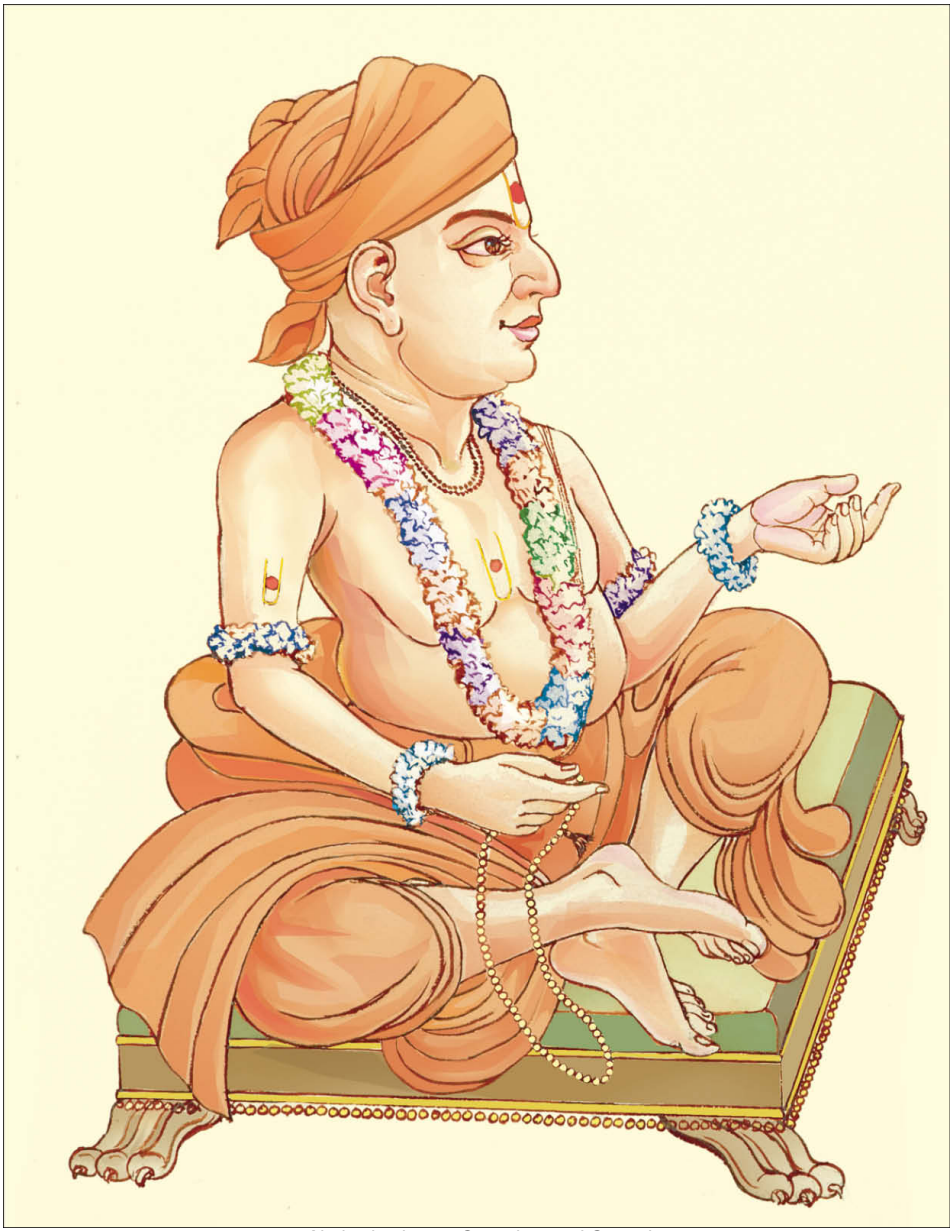
Hearing this, the Bibi said, "This stick is for God only and if he is God then I will come personally to offer him the stick."

She went with Sura Khachar. When she saw Maharaj she gave the babul stick to him and prayed, "O Swaminarayan! Please come to take me to heaven when my days are over!"

Maharaj said, "Certainly," and assured her that he would come without fail. And

sure enough when the end of her life was near, the all-merciful Maharaj appeared before her. He had in his hand the same babul stick, which she had given to him. The Bibi recognized Maharaj. She was immediately transported to Akshardam – the divine abode. How merciful is God!

15. Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami



Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami

Jodia is a very famous port in Kathiawad (Saurashtra). There is a beautiful village near Jodia, called Bhadra, on whose outskirts flow the river Und. On both banks, there is a beautiful forest of mango, pipal, neem, rose, apple and banyan trees.

Over two hundred years ago, in that town, there lived a holy Brahmin, Bholanath Sharma, with his wife, Sakarbai. As his name would suggest, Bholanath was really *bhola* – naive, gentle and religious-minded. Sakarbai was also very mellow and pious. Both of them were followers of Atmanand Swami. They did not have any children. Atmanand Swami once blessed them, "Aksharbrahman, the divine abode of the Lord himself, will take birth as your son."

After some time, on the day of 17 October 1785 CE (Sharad Purnima [Aso *sud* 15] in Samvat 1841), a son was born to them, and Ramanand Swami named him Mulji.

Right from his childhood Mulji revealed a fine intellect and immense devotion to God. When he was four-years-old, he told his mother, "Mother, give me some milk."

His mother replied, "Wait, let me first offer it to God. Then I will give it to you."

Mulji replied with the surprising answer, "When I drink milk, Thakorji also drinks along with me." So saying, Mulji drank all the milk. As he did so, Sakarbai saw a thin white line on the lips of the *murti* and she realized the truth behind Mulji's words.

Once, Mulji asked his mother, "Mother, please sing the songs that are sung during the sacred thread ceremony."

Mother asked him, "Why?"

Mulji replied, "Lord Ghanshyam has revealed himself on this earth as the son of Dharmadev. At this time, Lord Ghanshyam is being given the sacred thread in Ayodhya. Ghanshyam is my God. So please sing some sacred thread ceremony songs."

Sakarbai was amazed to hear this and started singing the songs, as requested by her son.

Many a time mother Sakarbai would tell Mulji to rock the cradle of his younger brother Sunderji. Whilst rocking the cradle, he would say, "Mother, I want to become a sadhu, and my brother Sunderji will also become a sadhu."

Mulji was given the sacred thread at the age of eight.

Sometimes Mulji's father would say to him, "Mulji! You are still very young. This is the age when you should play, eat and enjoy life."

Mulji would calmly reply, "Father! How can one know when one will die? Therefore one should engage in devotion right from an early age."

Once, Mulji was busy in the field watering the sugarcane crop. Shriji Maharaj suddenly appeared before him, and reminded him of his mission on this earth, "What have you come to do and what are you doing? The Brahmic consciousness in this world has dried up, so leave your home now." On hearing this, Mulji immediately left his home, and went to meet Shriji Maharaj.

After some time on 20 January 1810 CE (Posh *sud* Punam, Samvat 1866), Shriji Maharaj performed a *yagna* at Dabhan and initiated Mulji Bhakta into the sadhu-fold, naming him Gunatitanand Swami.

Gunatitanand Swami was a great *tapasvi* (ascetic) and always engaged himself in the service of others. He used to serve old and ailing sadhus. He was very proficient in the

art of preaching and explained the greatness and glory of Shriji Maharaj to everyone. He was dutiful and obedient and carried out all the commands of Shriji Maharaj, faithfully and enthusiastically. Shriji Maharaj was very pleased by his undivided loyalty and devotion.

On 24 May 1826 CE (Vaishakh *vad* 3, Samvat 1882), construction of the Junagadh mandir commenced. Then in Gadhada, on 11 April 1827 CE (Chaitri Punam, Samvat 1883), Shriji Maharaj decided to appoint Gunatitanand Swami as the mahant of Junagadh. So during the assembly he said, "Call Gunatitanand Swami." When Muktanand Swami brought Gunatitanand Swami, Shriji Maharaj took the garland from his own neck, put it around the neck of Gunatitanand Swami and proclaimed, "He is the mahant, the religious head of our Junagadh mandir." Thus Gunatitanand Swami was made mahant of the Junagadh mandir.

At the time when Shriji Maharaj decided to return to his abode, he sent a letter to Gunatitanand Swami at Junagadh asking him to come and see him. On receipt of the letter, Gunatitanand Swami hastened to Gadhpur, walking at the rate of sixty miles a day. On meeting Shriji Maharaj he offered prostrations and sat before him.

Shriji Maharaj then asked all his followers to visit Junagadh once every year, and listen to the discourses of Gunatitanand Swami for at least a month. On 1 June 1830 CE (Jeth *sud* 10, Samvat 1886) Shriji Maharaj returned to his abode – Akshardham. After the funeral rites of Maharaj had been performed at Lakshmiwadi, Swami was going for a bath when he saw green grass swaying around the stream. Seeing this Swami thought, "Oh! Water is the life of this grass. How green it is! Similarly, Maharaj was our life. But he is gone!" While these thoughts were running through his mind, Swami became unconscious and fell down. Suddenly, Maharaj emerged there in a divine form and brought Swami back to consciousness and said, "Swami, I have not gone away! I dwell in you eternally." Having said this Maharaj disappeared. Swami, who was feeling unhappy by the departure of Maharaj, felt overwhelmed after the darshan of Maharaj.

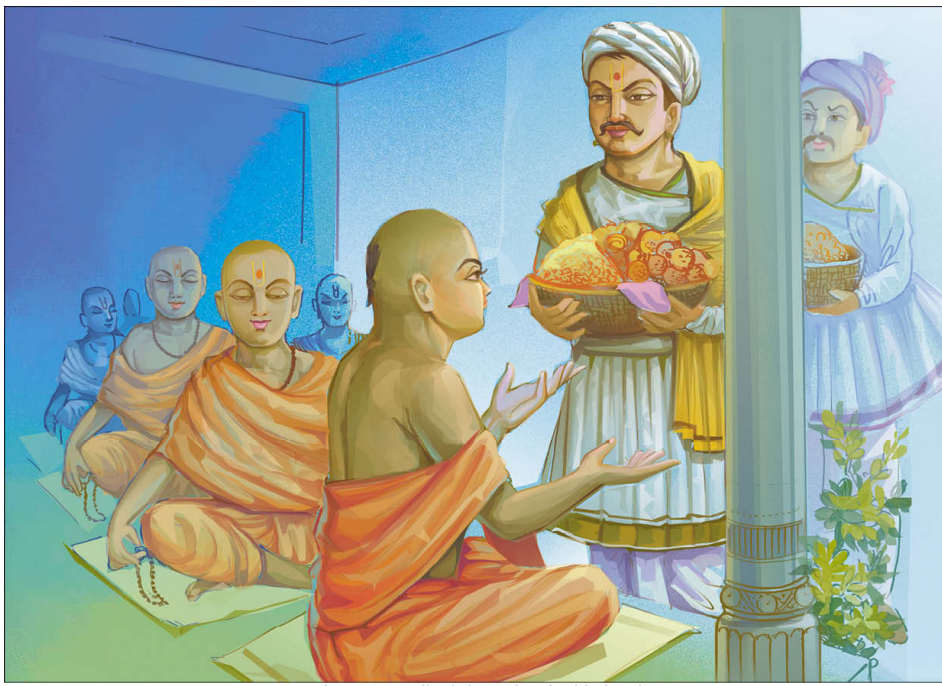
Gunatitanand Swami then went back to Junagadh and completed the construction of mandir. He also built a new *dharmashala* for the sadhus. His simplicity, spirit of service and spiritual greatness had a great impact upon the disciples who visited the mandir. He used to sweep the mandir precincts as he believed it was a form of service to God. He ate only simple food like *mung dal, rotla* (thick millet bread), buttermilk and *khichdi*, and always shunned rich and sweet dishes. He walked barefooted, and always had a cold water bath.

The local Muslim king and many Nagar Brahmins of Junagadh became his followers. He used to give learned discourses in a most pleasing manner. Well known sadhus, acharyas, and even Gopalanand Swami used to come to Junagadh to hear the inspiring talks of Gunatitanand Swami. Such great souls as Bhagatji Maharaj, Jaga Bhakta, Balmukunddasji, Yogeshwardasji and Raghuvirji Maharaj were among his devout followers. Bhagatji Maharaj was the guru of Shastriji Maharaj. The spiritual discourses of Gunatitanand Swami are compiled in a book popularly know as Swamini Vatu.

Swamiji stayed in Junagadh for forty years. Then he went to Gondal. He reverted to

the divine abode, Akshardham, on 21 October 1867 CE (Ashwin *sud* 12, Samvat 1923). His body was cremated at a place which has become known as Akshar Deri. The mandir built on that monument by Shastriji Maharaj has become famous as Akshar Mandir.

16. Gunatitanand Swami's Talks (Swamini Vato)



At noon a disciple arrived with food

We are now well acquainted with the life of Gunatitanand Swami. He was a firm believer in the divinity of Shriji Maharaj, and a true exponent of his philosophy. Besides, in saintliness, dedication to service, meditational power and other virtues there was no one to equal him. Once, he had asked Shriji Maharaj, "What shall I do? Shall I meditate, serve, preach or behave as *atmarup*?"

Shriji Maharaj replied, "You should preach and give discourses and, in this way, explain the true glory of God to all."

In accordance with the wish of Shriji Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami discoursed day and night, bringing spiritual benefit and enlightenment to countless people. The knowldge he preached is called *'Gunatit Jnan'*. The language of his talks is very simple and lucid and can be followed by one and all. His anecdotes are very interesting and instructive. Let us see five of them.

(1)

Swaminarayan Hare Swamie vāt kari je: "Swāminārāyan nāmnā mantra jevo bijo koi mantra āj baliyo nathi, ne e mantre kālā nāgnu pan jher na chade, ne e mantre vishay udi jāy chhe, brahmarup thāy chhe ne kāl, karma, māyānu bandhan chhuti jāy chhe, evo bahu baliyo e mantra chhe. Māte nirantar bhajan karvu" (1.153).

"Today, there is no mantra as powerful as the Swaminarayan mantra. It neutralizes even the poison of a black cobra and dispels the *vishays*. With it, one becomes *brahmarup* and is freed from the bondage of *kal,* karma and *maya*. That is how powerful the mantra is. Therefore, chant it always."

The divine power of the mantra was attested when a poisonous serpent bit the finger of Yogiji Maharaj in Gondal. When Bhaktivallabhdas Swami saw the snake he realized that it had bitten Yogiji Maharaj. He immediately informed Shastriji Maharaj, who then instructed that Yogiji Maharaj be taken to the Akshar Deri and that all should start chanting the Swaminarayan mantra with total faith. Accordingly, one and all began chanting the mantra.

When the Maharaja of Gondal came to know of the snake bite, he immediately sent his doctor to treat Swami. But Shastriji Maharaj refused the treatment, and affirmed his faith in the chanting of Swaminarayan mantra. He said that God would cure him.

After about twelve hours, the effect of the poison completely disappeared. However, the bite and poison were so vicious that the tip of Yogiji Maharaj's left hand index finger withered slightly. Swamiji's index finger was, as a result, somewhat bent.

As this story shows, we too must recite the Swaminarayan mantra with faith and devotion.

(2)

Swaminarayan Hare Swamie vāt kari je: "Koi Bhagwān sambhāre teni sevā māre karāvvi, tenā lugdā māre dhovrāvvā, ne tene māre bethā bethā khāvā devu chhe" (1.276).

"If someone remembers God, then I will arrange for his *seva*, have his clothes washed and give him food at home."

If one worships God devoutly and with implicit faith in him, he will take care of everything. He will look after every single need if he has full faith in him.

One of the disciples of Gunatitanand Swami, Balmukunddas Swami, once recited this Swamini Vatu in the mandir at Chalala. Some disciples asked, "If we do not cook and instead simply chant the name of God, shall we get our meal today? Will God get the meal ready for us? This does not seem true."

Balmukund Swami said, "This is true. If we pray to God with absolute faith then he will give us food. Let us all pray to God. Nobody should have any doubts. This discourse is true and God will give us food."

Then from morning all of them sat in the mandir and started chanting the Swaminarayan mantra and singing bhajans. It was 11.30 a.m.; still there was no sign of any food appearing. Some followers started doubting the truth in Gunatitanand Swami's discourse. But Balmukund Swami never wavered in his belief. Exactly at 12 o'clock, a devotee suddenly arrived carrying various items of food and offered them to Swamiji and said, "Offer the food to Thakorji and then distribute it among the sadhus."

Swami said, “See, God has sent us food!”

He asked the devotee, “How come you are here?”

He said, “We are going to Amreli with the bridegroom party of my son. Since it was lunch time we were preparing to eat. Then villagers who were passing by informed us that Swamiji is in the mandir. So we thought of offering the food to sadhus before we eat.”

Thus, the disciples realized that when they prayed to God with full faith in him, he did not let them down. We always profit by doing bhajan provided our devotion is real.

(3)

Swaminarayan Hare Swamie vāt kari je:: “Karod kām bagādine pan ek moksha sudhārvo ne kadāpi karod kām sudhāryā ne ek moksha bagādyo to temā shu karyu?” (1.14).

“Spoil ten million tasks but improve your *moksha*. But if ten million tasks are improved and *moksha* is spoilt, what has been achieved?”

Mr Patel forgot about his own purchases

There was a Patel who lived in a small village. Once, he planned to go shopping to the nearby town. His wife gave him a long list of articles to be bought from the town. The Patel was very forgetful, so he noted down everything on a piece of paper. When some of the villagers came to know about the Patel's going to town for shopping, they also came, and asked, "Patel, will you bring this also?" He said, "O.K." The Patel noted everything down.

The Patel drove to the town in his bullock cart. He thought that first he would buy things for his neighbours, and later on for his own family. There was much hustle and bustle in the market. The Patel, one by one, bought what the villagers wanted and put them in the cart. The cart was filled up within a short time. So he returned home.

The people of the village called at his house to collect the things they had asked for and Patel gave them the articles he had bought for them. Within a short time the cart

became empty. His wife who was watching with growing anxiety asked the Patel, "Where are our purchases?"

Patel scratched his head and said, "I absolutely forgot to buy our things."

Shall we call Patel a wise man or a foolish one?

He went to the market and forgot about his own purchases. In the same way we do many other tasks. If we think only of others, but forget to think of our own *moksha* or neglect to worship God then we would be as foolish as this Patel.

That is why Gunatitanand Swami stresses that we should think of our own liberation even if it means less attention to worldly work.

We must think of God constantly if we are to attain *moksha*. If we offer wholehearted devotion to him and do bhajan regularly, then we can be sure that God will always protect us.

(4)

Swaminarayan Hare Swamie vāt kari je: "Bhagwān to potānā bhaktani rakshā karvāmāj bethā chhe. Keni pethe? To jem pāpan ānkhni rakshā kare chhe ne hāth kanthni rakshā kare chhe ne māvtar chhokrāni rakshā kare chhe ne rājā prajāni rakshāmā chhe, temaj Bhagwān āpni rakshāmā chhe" (1.22).

"God always protects his devotees. Just as the eyelids protect the eyes, the hands protect the neck, a mother protects her child and a king protects his subjects, God protects us."

Prahlad, Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, for example, were so deeply devoted to God that he protected them from all evil forces. Similarly, Shriji Maharaj protects his devotees as the following story shows.

A devotee called Naja Bhakta was living in the small town of Bhadli. This small town was much oppressed by the shepherds. So Naja Bhakta went to live in another town called Bhoyra. He told Vasur Khachar, the king, about the glory of Shriji Maharaj. The king heard him and then said, "If your God is really God, then he should present himself here tomorrow. Otherwise I will break your kneecaps."

At that time Shriji Maharaj was in Visnagar.

"How can Maharaj reach Bhoyra in one night?" worried Naja Bhakta.

The king was a very cruel man and would not hesitate to carry out his threat. Desperately Naja Bhakta began to think of Shriji Maharaj and made a silent appeal.

The king begged for forgiveness at Shriji Maharaj's feet

Meanwhile, Shriji Maharaj started out from Visnagar. On the way, near Vadhvan, there was a river in flood. Walking over the waters, Maharaj reached Bhoyra early in the morning and sent a messenger to the king, "Naja Bhakta's God has arrived."

Early in the morning, when Naja Bhakta opened the door of his house, he saw Shriji Maharaj standing at his door. He was stunned. He knelt at the feet of Maharaj in gratitude. Then after some time the two went together to the court of the cruel king. On the way, Maharaj heard about the people's woes and their cries of anguish.

Naja Bhakta told Maharaj, "The king is very cruel man. He punishes people without mercy and breaks their kneecaps."

When the king came to meet Shriji Maharaj, Shriji Maharaj at once sent him into samadhi and showed him the horrors of hell. Here Yamraj beat him mercilessly.

After some time, by the grace of Maharaj, he came out of the samadhi. Immediately he fell at the feet of Maharaj, confessed his evil deeds and asked for forgiveness. He realized that Swaminarayan was God incarnate.

Maharaj instructed him to be good and never subject people to terrible punishments. Then, Shriji Maharaj initiated him into the Fellowship and made him a *satsangi*. This was how Maharaj protected his devotee Naja Bhakta, when he was in danger.

(5)

Swaminarayan Hare Swamie vāt kari je: "Ketlākne man ramāde chhe ne ketlāk manne ramāde chhe. Ā vāt nitya vichārvā jevi chhe" (4.123).

"Some are controlled by the mind and some control the mind. This talk is worth

contemplating daily."

Our mind is full of worldly desires, and is therefore our greatest enemy. It prevents us from thinking of God and offering worship or service. But there are people who can control their minds.

There was a boy of the Koli caste in Gadhada. His father was growing sweet pumpkins in his orchard. The boy decided to offer the first pumpkin to Shriji Maharaj. When the pumpkins ripened, he selected one of them for Maharaj. On his way to meet Shriji Maharaj he was tempted by the sweet smell of his ripe pumpkin. The boy thought that he might as well eat it.

But almost immediately he scolded his mind, controlled his desire and went on his way. Again, after some time, the thought came into his mind that people offer very nice and costly gifts to Shriji Maharaj. Who would appreciate an insignificant thing like a pumpkin? So why not eat it! But again he resisted the temptation, "No, no! I have decided to give it to Maharaj, so I must give it to him." Thus, keeping his mind under control, he soon reached the court of Dada Khachar.

The boy offered his pumpking to Maharaj

Maharaj himself called the boy, and asked for his pumpkin. He ate some of it himself and the rest he distributed as *prasad*. Maharaj was very happy with this young boy because he had succeeded in controlling his mind. Maharaj asked the *kothari (*storekeeper) to give the boy a reward of 5 kg of sugar crystals to take home.

In that assembly there was a Bania. He thought that if this boy could get 5 kg of sugar crystals for a single pumpkin, how much sugar crystals would he get if he gave a cartful of pumpkins to Maharaj!

The very next day, the Bania came to Maharaj with a cartful of sweet pumpkins. Maharaj told him, “Throw all the pumpkins into the river and let the fish eat them.”

The Bania was disappointed. He asked, “Why Maharaj? Yesterday you gave 5 kg of sugar for just one pumpkin, while I have brought you a whole cart-load.”

Maharaj replied, “Yes, I did give the boy 5 kg of sugar crystals. But it was not for

the pumpkin; it was for the self-control that the boy had shown over his mind. You came here with greed in your heart. So you will get nothing."

Thus, if we conquer our minds, and resist evil temptations, then Maharaj will be extremely pleased.

17. Shastriji Maharaj

You must have heard the name of Shastriji Maharaj. He was the guru of Yogiji Maharaj. He was born on 31 January 1865 CE (Vasant Panchmi [Maha *sud* 5] in V.S. 1921) in a small village called Mahelav. His father's name was Dhoribhai and mother's name was Hetba. In his childhood he was known as Dungar Bhakta.

Dungar Bhakta was very brave and clever right from his early days. In his studies he always came first. He had a natural tendency to offer devotion to God. While other children played, he would make mandirs out of sand, place *murtis* of God in them and then offer his prayers to the deity.

At the age of seventeen he left home and became the disciple of Vignananand Swami. Acharya Viharilalji Maharaj gave him *bhagwati diksha* on 29 November 1882 CE (Kartik *vad* 5, V.S. 1939), and he was named Swami Yagnapurushdas. Nobody could compete with him in his Sanskrit studies. He had defeated great pundits in religious debates and so people called him by the name of Shastriji Maharaj.

His piety and saintliness were unsurpassed. Shastriji Maharaj fearlessly preached the doctrine of Akshar and Purushottam. Some sadhus, not approving of this doctrine, harassed him, insulted him, and sometimes even thrashed him. To avoid conflict, he left Vartal and went to Bochasan. Here he built a mandir and installed the *murtis* of Akshar and Purushottam.

Shastriji Maharaj inspired the construction of the magnificent mandirs at Bochasan, Sarangpur, Gondal, Atladra and Gadhada. By his influence the lives of dacoits, bandits, thieves and sinners in general were wholly transformed. They became his ardent disciples. He founded the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). Shastri Narayanswarupdas (Pramukh Swami Maharaj) was appointed the President of the Sanstha in 1950 by Shastriji Maharaj. Shastriji Maharaj expounded the full greatness of our beloved Yogiji Maharaj. He performed many glorious deeds on this earth and departed to Akshardham on 10 May 1951 CE (Vaishakh *sud* 4, V.S. 2007) at Sarangpur.

18. Behaviour in School and at Home

We are the children and the disciples of God. We are members of the Bal Mandal (Children's Forum). Our habits and behaviour should be good and proper. If we tell lies or quarrel with others, our parents will naturally be blamed. People will ask, "Who are

his parents? Who is his guru? Is he taught such bad manners in the Bal Mandal?" Thus, by our bad behaviour we bring disgrace to our parents, to our guru, to our Sanstha. So we must perfect our character and manners.

A *satsangi* child should wake up early in the morning and perform puja; and then he should bow down to his parents. Some children are very rude to their elder brothers, sisters and parents. This is most unbecoming for a *satsangi* child. We should respect our elders. We should obey them and should be very polite when we talk to them. We should always use decent, respectful language while talking to people.

Some children have a bad habit of quarrelling with everyone over everything. They want things their own way. They will wear only some clothes and eat only some kinds of food. They want the best of everything. All this makes things difficult for other people. One should therefore take what is available and be satisfied with it. The true followers of Shriji Maharaj will not make a row over trifling matters, like items of food or clothing. We should wear whatever clothes our parents give us. In case we don't like them, we should tell them in a polite way, but never quarrel with them.

There are children who always tease their younger brother or sister. Some say, "Why should I work, when my brother is idle? Why should he have better things than I? Why should I write with a pencil, when he writes with a pen?" Thus, every now and then there are petty quarrels arising from jealousy. A *satsangi* child should not behave in this way. They should be above petty squabbles. They should be kind and helpful to their brothers and sisters and should live in harmony with all members of the family, and co-operate with them.

Some children spend a lot of money. They never enjoy food prepared at home, but like to eat in a hotel or in the bazaar. They go to hotels with their friends and watch TV for hours. Serials and films are a must for them. They have all sorts of fancies and extravagant habits. And if they don't get money, they won't hesitate to steal it in order to satisfy their bad habits. They keep the company of children with similar undesirable habits.

Such habits are bad and should be got rid off. A *satsangi* should not eat anything from a hotel or restaurant. Such food are unhygenic and unwholesome. Our health can be adversely affected by such adulterated food. Good children should not watch TV or films. They do not steal. If they want anything they would ask their parents, but never steal. They always remain in good company and avoid the company of bad children, who have a habit of stealing or telling lies.

Satsangi children who are kind and well behaved, are loved by one and all. People will also speak highly of their parents and their guru. Let us therefore resolve to observe the instructions given below:

Don'ts

We will never steal.

We will never tell lies.

We will never eat in a hotel.

We will never watch TV or cinema.

We will never speak back to our parents.
We will never quarrel over food or clothes.
We will never fight with brothers or sisters.
We will shun bad company and keep away from addictions.
We will never drink unfiltered water or milk.

Do's

We will always tell the truth.
We will always respect our parents and elders.
We will perform puja daily.
We will apply the *tilak* and *chandlo* to our forehead.
We will always be studious.
We will always attend our *bal mandal* assemblies.
We will always visit the mandir.
We will always obey our guru.

19. Punja Dodia

Punja Bhakta fell down unconscious

In the village of Panvi there was a Rajput devotee by the name of Punja Dodia. Before he became a *satsangi* he had decided to end his life if he failed to find God. So he went to Nana Gopnath and clinging to a *murti* of Shivji was about to plunge himself into the violent waves of the sea. All of a sudden he heard a divine voice, "Bhagwan Swaminarayan has incarnated and you shall meet his sadhus." Punjabhai heard the voice and so returned home.

One day, Punjabhai was going to his field with his plough. On his way to the field he met Krupanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami. The devout Punja knelt at their feet and prayed, "Show me where God is." He then took the two sadhus to his home and served them food. The sadhus told him about the glory of Shriji Maharaj, and inspired him to follow the divine path. Punjabhai became a *satsangi.*

Punja Dodia became a very staunch *satsangi.* He remembered Maharaj at all times.

In addition he also inspired his daughter and her husband to follow the path of renunciation.

Punja Bhakta had asked Vasta Khachar of Kariyani to inform him whenever Maharaj came to his house. Once, quite unexpectedly, Shriji Maharaj came to Kariyani. Vasta Khachar sent Gangaram Dave to inform Punjabhai about the arrival of Maharaj. When Gangaram Dave went to Panvi to tell Punja Bhagat about this, the latter was working in the field. As soon as he heard the news, he sent the bullocks with the plough home and hurried to Kariyani.

When he reached Kariyani, Darbar told him, “Maharaj has just left for Sarangpur.” Hearing this, Punjabhai, disregarding hunger and thirst, ran after him in the direction of Sarangpur.

On his way to Sarangpur, Maharaj decided to rest under a tree, midway between the two small villages of Sajeli and Vajeli. Maharaj told Naja Jogia, “I am thirsty.” Naja offered water two to three times to Maharaj, but his thirst was not quenched.

Maharaj then climbed the tree and saw Punja Bhakta running in his direction. Immediately he got down from the tree, and with a jug of cold water ran to meet Punja Bhakta. He embraced him, offered him cold water, and asked him to rest under the tree. Maharaj told Naja, “Now my thirst is quenched.”

Punja was a very sincere devotee. Not only did he worship Shriji Maharaj, but also thought very highly of Shriji Maharaj’s mare, Manki. “How blessed this Manki is! Shriji Maharaj, God incarnate, rides her.” Thinking in this way he used to bring grass for the mare to eat and always took care to see that the grass was fresh, soft and had no thorns. Such was his love for Manki. He used to say that Manki was free from *maya* and was a *mukta* because she had association with Shriji Maharaj. So she should not be given ordinary grass to eat.

Once, Punja Bhakta was going to Gadhada with a fresh load of grass in his bullock cart. On that very day Shriji Maharaj had departed to Akshardham. Bhaguji and Ratanji were going to town to make the necessary arrangements for the funeral rites. They met Punja on the way. Bhaguji asked, “Punjabhai, where are you going?”

Punja Bhakta replied, “I have brought fresh grass for Manki. I shall deliver it, and have the darshan of Maharaj.”

Bhaguji told him that the rider of Manki, Shriji Maharaj, had just left this earth. On hearing this, Punja Bhakta fell down, unconscious.

He regained consciousness after three hours, but he had a foreboding that his death was near. He stopped taking food and water. He came to Gadhada and met Gopalanand Swami and started mourning. Gopalanand Swami offered him food, but he refused and said, “I do not feel like taking food or water.” Not that he wanted to starve but that he did not relish any food at the time.

Swami requested him not to give up food and water. Punjabhai replied, “I do not want to starve but I do not relish food at all. If I am knowingly trying to starve then I take an oath on the *paramhansas*. If this has happened by the grace of Shriji Maharaj then he will take me to his abode on the thirteenth day.”

On the thirteenth day after the departure of Shriji Maharaj, Punja Bhakta was

performing his daily duties. As soon as his duties were over, he collapsed on the floor. His soul departed from his mortal body. Everybody saw Shriji Maharaj himself come to take his soul to Akshardham. Such was the dedicated life of the great devotee Punja Dodia.

20. Nath Bhakta

In Vadodara there lived a staunch follower of Shriji Maharaj. His name was Nath Bhakta. He was a Kachhiya Patel by caste. Shriji Maharaj always spoke very highly of him. Nath Bhakta used to present skilfully woven clothes to Shriji Maharaj. He loved and adored Maharaj very much. Whatever little he earned from selling vegetables, he would spend it for Maharaj and his sadhus by offering them rich and wholesome food.

Once, Nath Bhakta had gone to Gadhada. After staying there for some time, he left for Vadodara with the permission of Maharaj. Some time later, Maharaj changed his mind and asked one of his followers to call Nath Bhakta back. The man hurried after Nath Bhakta and caught up with him at Vadodara, near the river Vishwamitri. On hearing the summons from Shriji Maharaj, Nath Bhakta turned back. Even though his home was near, he did not send any message to his own people. On hearing about his obedience and loyalty, Shriji Maharaj was greatly pleased.

Nath Bhakta's wife was also an ardent devotee. When she died many people saw Shriji Maharaj carrying her great soul to Akshardham in his divine chariot. At that time Nath Bhakta did not mourn at all though he had suffered a bereavement.

Nath Bhakta had a young son, Prabhudas. Prabhudas used to experience samadhi. He would bring dry dates, sugar crystals, etc., from Shriji Maharaj in the form of *prasad*. When he died at the age of sixteen, Nath Bhakta distributed sweets among the people of the town. Some of them were shocked at this act of charity. They said, "Nath Bhakta, what are you doing? Have you lost balance of your mind?"

Nath Bhakta said, "He was a devotee of God. God has called him. This is a joyous occasion. There is no need to mourn at all."

Such was the noble understanding of Nath Bhakta. Shriji Maharaj praised the profound understanding of Nath Bhakta, and asked others to follow his example.

21. Behaviour in Bal Mandal

We need food and water to preserve our body. We bathe to keep it clean and perform exercises to keep our body strong and healthy. Similarly, we should cultivate noble thoughts to keep our mind pure. For training our mind and to learn good behaviour we should attend the weekly Bal Mandal assembly. This purifies our mind. Our bad habits go away and we become happy. So, one should never miss the weekly Bal Mandal assembly.

In the Bal Mandal we learn how to behave properly. When we enter a mandir, we should first prostrate before God, and then bow down to all the sadhus present and take our seat as directed by the sadhus.

We should never laugh or crack jokes while the assembly is in progress. Some children have a habit of indulging in all sorts of mischief when a discourse is in progress. Not only do they not listen to the discourse themselves, but they do not allow others to listen. We should bear in mind that we go there to learn something good and beneficial and not to create a disturbance.

We should listen attentively to the talks and stories narrated in the Bal Mandal. We should remember the anecdotes and stories that we hear, write them down and bring them the next week. At the time of prayer we should think of only God and our guru. We should remain still and quiet and not fidget. We should not answer if somebody else is asked. If we are asked then only should we speak. We should reply in a very polite manner.

While playing games in the Bal Mandal we should not quarrel with each other. Neither should we be too proud of our victory, nor feel depressed when we are defeated. We should allow the younger players to play first. We should not say, "I will play only if you let me play this game." Whatever game is being played we should play and whatever task we are given we should do it. We should not think about play all the time. In Bal Mandal we come not only to play but to learn too.

When *prasad* is being distributed we should wait quietly and patiently till our turn comes. Before eating the *prasad* remember God. If we do not like the *prasad* we should not throw it away but bow to it and give it to others. *Prasad* is sanctified food offered to God. Take only as much *prasad* as you wish to eat.

Some children take more *prasad* than they can eat and then waste it. This is not good. If *prasad* is served on paper, that paper should be thrown only in the waste-paper basket. If it is given on a reusable plate, it should be put in the designated place.

After taking *prasad* we should not rush for water, but wait in an orderly queue until our turn comes. We should drink water in a clean glass, and should have it in such a way that the glass does not touch our lips. Then we should clean the place ourselves. We should form the habit of doing our work ourselves.

After taking *prasad* in this way, remember to say, "Jai Swaminarayan" to everybody before going home.

22. Vajiba of Vijapur

Maharaj stretched his feet to touch the pipal tree

God alone knows the affection that a real devotee bears for him in his heart. Vajiba is an ideal example of a true devotee. A real devotee does not waver in his faith in spite of the miracles shown to him or doubts raised by others! Even if God himself comes down to test the sincerity of a true devotee or undermine his faith he will not flinch from his loyalty and devotion. Vajiba of Vijapur was one such devotee.

Vajiba was of the Sathwara caste. She served sadhus and ascetics. She would always invite sadhus to her house, and then offer them marijuana or smoking pipes if they desired. She never found fault in their bad habits because she believed them to be men of God.

Once, Ramdas Swami, a *paramhansa* of Shriji Maharaj, came to Vijapur. When Vajiba came to know of this, she invited him to her place. Ramdas Swami stayed there for twelve days and talked to her husband about God, religion and about the characteristics of a true sadhu. He described to him the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Vajiba listened to these religious talks from behind a curtain.

Both Vajiba and her husband, inspired by the discourses of Ramdas Swami, accepted the precepts and doctrines of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and became *satsangis*. From then on Vajiba stopped giving shelter to sadhus who indulged in intoxicants like *bhang*, marijuana or heroine. Even though she had not met Shriji Maharaj, she became one of his most faithful disciples.

Once, Shriji Maharaj went to Vijapur to test her faith in him. He took Mulji Brahmachari with him. Maharaj inquired in the village whether he could find shelter for the night.

The village folks said, “There is a woman here, Vajiba, who used to give shelter to

sadhus and ascetics; but she does not entertain them any more because she has become a devotee of Swaminarayan. She does not have any faith in the *bawas* and *vairagis* who ask for all sorts of intoxicants.

Maharaj said, "We will go to her place only."

Maharaj went to Vajiba's place and asked for shelter.

"We are pilgrims," he said, "we want to stay here for the night. We will lie down here in the courtyard of your house? We won't ask for anything else."

Vajiba replied somewhat harshly, "Hypocrites and cheats like you come here in large numbers. Did you take to the saffron robe and priesthood because you could not get enough to eat? It seems that you are happily maintaining your robust frame but have you ever thought of the well-being of your *atma?* I am sorry I don't give any lodging or boarding to sadhus like you. Oh! Before you leave, one word of advice; if you wish to attain liberation, you must seek refuge at the feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan."

"Vajiba, you are mistaken," Maharaj protested. "Swaminarayan is not God. On the contrary, he is a hypocrite. I think you have been misled by someone about his glory and greatness. The pundits from here to Kashi can prove that he is not God. Seeing that you are illiterate and gullible, someone has misled you."

But Vajiba was firm in her faith. She retorted, "You and your pundits are all wrong. I am prepared to follow Bhagwan Swaminarayan even if it costs me my life. Henceforth, if I hear you speak ill of Swaminarayan, I shall throw all your belongings out of my house."

Meanwhile her husband came, and he also rebuked Maharaj for speaking ill of Swaminarayan. Maharaj was silenced. "I shall not speak a word," he said. "We will stay here for one night. We won't ask for anything else, and even if you beat us we will not go."

Vajiba said, "I will not give you a mattress or food and if I see you smoking or taking *ganja* I will throw all your belongings out."

Maharaj could not sleep. After some time he said, "Mother, please give me a cot."

Vajiba said, "I do not have one."

"Give me the painted cot that lies in the room at the back," Maharaj said.

Vajiba was taken aback. "How could this sadhu know about the bed in my back room?" she thought. However, she brought the cot from the back room and placed it in the courtyard.

After some time Maharaj said, "Mother, give me a mattress."

Vajiba said, "I do not have any."

Maharaj said, "Right in the middle of a pile of mattresses inside is a new mattress. Give it to me."

Vajiba was again surprised at Maharaj's insight. She gave him the mattress too.

To ease the day's fatigue Maharaj stretched his legs. He stretched his legs further and touched the pipal tree in the compound. Divine light radiated from the big toe of his right foot. Vajiba saw this from a crack in the door, and was dumbfounded at the sight. However she thought, "There are so many sadhus like him who have

supernatural powers, but they cannot equal Bhagwan Swaminarayan." Pondering thus she went to sleep.

Early in the morning Maharaj woke up and left.

After some time Vajiba went to Gadhada for darshan of Maharaj. On seeing her, Maharaj called her and asked, "Have you seen these feet before? They are the same that touched the pipal tree in your compound."

Vajiba was amazed and felt repentant for not recognizing Maharaj. She asked for forgiveness with a feeling of shame, "Maharaj I am sorry I could not recognize you."

Maharaj replied, "You are my true devotee, and I came only to test your faith in me. And you passed the test."

Maharaj told everyone about the staunch faith Vajiba reposed in him. We should all be as steadfast in our faith as Vajiba.

23. Kirtan

Bhāv dharine bolo jai jai,
Akshar Purushottam jai jai
Akshar Purushottam... jai jai...
Shāstra sakalno sār param e,
Brahman ane Parabrahman jai jai
Brahman ane Parabrahman... jai jai...
Mul Akshar je Brahman Anādi,
Gunātitānand jai jai
Gunātitānand... jai jai...
Purushottam Parabrahman parātpar,
Shri Hari Sahajānand jai jai
Shri Hari Sahajānand... jai jai...
Nartanu dhāri pote pragatya,
Swāmi ane Bhagwan jai jai
Swāmi ane Bhagwan... jai jai...
Bhāve nām ratan karvāthi,
shānti pāme man jai jai
shānti pāme man... jai jai...
Māte sarve bolo jai jai,
Akshar Purushottam jai jai
Akshar Purushottam... jai jai...

Meaning:

With true feeling hail the victory of Akshar-Purushottam….

Glory to Brahman and Parabrahman…

This is the highest principle of all the shastras.

Glory to Gunatitanand Swami, who is Mul Akshar, the eternal Brahman…

Glory to Shri Hari Sahajanand (Bhagwan Swaminarayan), who is the supreme Purushottam Parabrahman…

Glory to Swami (Gunatitanand) and Bhagwan (Swaminarayan), who both assumed a human form and manifested (on earth)…

By chanting this mantra (of Akshar-Purushottam) with true feelings, the mind will attain peace…

So, all call out 'Glory to Akshar-Purushottam'.

Glossary

A

abhay-mudra hand-posture of fearlessness giving a guarantee or promise of protection to the devotees

ahimsak yagna Vedic ritual in which grains are offered

akhand-anand eternal bliss

arti Hindu ritual of waving lighted wicks before the *murti* of God as an act of worship

asan seat

ashram hermitage; dwelling of ascetics

ashtang yoga eight-fold yoga

atma the pure *jiva*, distinct from the physical, subtle and causal bodies

atmarup one who has realized true self as *atma*

B

bal mandal children's forum

bawa ascetic

Bhagwan God

bhagvati diksha initiation into the sadhu-fold

bhajan devotional song

bhang intoxicant

bhiksha anything given or taken in alms

bhola innocent, naive

bibi a Muslim woman

Brahman second highest of the five eternal realities, i.e., transcends everything except Parabrahman

brahmarup possessing qualities similar to those of Brahman

buddhi intellect

C

chaitanyarup the form of divine light

chandlo auspicious vermilion mark applied on the forehead

D

Dada Khachar son of king Abhaysinh and later on king of Gadhada; he was a staunch disciple of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

dal spicy soup of dissolved pulses

dandvat prostration

darbar court of residence belonging to a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas

Darbar One who belongs to the Kshatriya community

darshan seeing with devotion or reverence

dharmashala accommodation for pilgrims

dhoti unstitched, long piece of cloth traditionally worn by males as a lower garment, usually wound around the waist with one end tucked in after passing between the legs

Dhruv the son of king Uttanpad and grandson of Manu. Once, contemptuously treated both by the king and his favourite queen. Consequently, Dhruv went to the woods and performed such rigorous austerities that he was raised by Vishnu to the position of the pole star

dhun form of *jap*, i.e., chanting of the holy name of God, often to the accompaniment of musical instruments

diksha initiation

dudhpak rich delicacy made of sweetened milk, boiled rice, aromatic spices and nuts

E

ekantik dharma collective term for the four endeavours of dharma (religious disciplines and duties, i.e., *niyams*), *jnan* (spiritual knowledge), *vairagya* (an aversion for worldly pleasures), and bhakti (devotion) coupled with the knowledge of God's greatness

G

gadi diocese

ganja intoxicant

gaumukhi cloth bag for turning rosary

ghar mandir home shrine

gopis women of the cowherd community who were devotees of Shri Krishna

guna quality

guru spiritual teacher; preceptor

guru parampara succession of God-realized gurus

J

jiva soul or self with worldly desires

Jivuba elder sister of Dada Khachar

K

kal time, the universal and continuous phenomenon that accounts for and gives rise to the progression of existence and events – allowing for the past, present and future – and which ultimately leads to the destruction of all things, thus often used as a synonym of death and destruction

kalash small water-pot made of copper

kanthi double-threaded necklace, usually made of *tulsi* beads, received by *satsangis* upon initiation into the Satsang fellowship, and worn as a sign of their affiliation to God

karma action, deed

khichdi spiced boiled rice

kirtan devotional song

kothari administrative head of mandir

kumkum vermilion powder used for applying *chandlo*

L

Laduba Second sister of Dada Khachar

M

mahant head priest of a mandir

mala rosary

mansi puja mental worship. Form of worship in which one devoutly performs puja, offers *arti*, *thal*, etc., to God mentally

maya instrument or power of God used as the fundamental 'substance' of creation.

mer the first and largest bead in a rosary

Mirabai a staunch devotee of Shri Krishna. She hailed from a royal family and was the queen of Udaipur

moksha liberation; deliverance of the *jiva* from recurring births and deaths and realization of God

mukta a liberated devotee, beyond all attachments

mung dal soup made from mung beans

murti image of God

P

panch vartman five vows a follower has to practise on receiving the initiatory mantra from the guru. They are abstinence from wine, flesh-eating, adultery, and stealing and to perform the duties of one's own station in life

panchang pranam special method of bowing in respect

paramhansa an ascetic; the best of the four types of sannyasis

ponk soft, green wheat grain

pradakshina circumambulation

pragat manifest

Prahlad an ardent devotee of Vishnu and son of the evil Hiranyakashipu

pranayam yogic breathing exercises

prarthana prayer

prasad sanctified food, blessed and consecrated by having been offered to God

puja worship

R

rishi a seer or sage

rotlo a basic unleavened bread-like staple food of many parts of Gujarat, made generally of millet flour that is kneaded and patted into a flat, circular shape before being cooked on an earthen or metal hot plate

S

samadhi divine trance; also a place where the last rites of a great person are performed

Sampradaya religious organization where there is the traditional handing down of knowledge through successive gurus

sannyasi person who has renounced all worldly duties and is living as an ascetic

Satsang holy fellowship

satsangi a devotee who practices the vows of *satsang*

shlok verse

Sura Khachar king of Loya

swadharma one's own dharma

T

thal food devotionally offered to God as a form of bhakti, which in turn consecrates the food– turning it into *prasad*.

tilak 'U' shaped mark made with sandlewood paste on one's forehead

tilakyu metal or wooden 'U' shaped template for applying tilak

V

vairagi ascetic

visarjan conclusion of ritual

vishay an object indulged in by the *jiva* via the *indriyas* (senses)

vrat vow, observance

Y

yagna sacrificial worship. Ceremonial ritual performed as a form of worship to seek the good favour and receive the blessings of the deities.